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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000248

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02-13-14

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: Maldives: Increasing signs of opposition to the long rule of President Gayoom

Refs: Colombo 181, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Opposition to President Gayoom's long rule of the Maldives appears to be growing stronger. Mission has heard that anti-Gayoom elements may be planning to rally in Male' and that police have been out in force to counter any such effort. There are also indications that an anti-Gayoom political party is increasingly active and may be picking up support. It remains unclear how serious the situation is for Gayoom, but it appears to be growing increasingly tense. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) REPORTS OF INCREASING DISSENSION: Opposition to President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's long rule of the Maldives appears to be growing stronger. One key indication of this came in a February 12 phone conversation between Ambassador Lunstead and Minh Pham, UNDP Resident Representative for the Maldives (Amcit--strictly protect). Pham said he was hearing an increasing number of reports that an "active underground" in the country was planning a large demonstration that would take place in Male' in coming days, possibly on February 12 or 14. In reaction to these reports, Pham related, the Maldivian government had imposed a "restrictive travel order" (effectively a curfew) from 1-4 AM for February 12 in Male'. Due to the increase in tension, the UN had raised its security posture to "Phase I" for the time being. (Note: We have not heard that any demonstration took place in Male' on February 12. Several attempts to contact Pham early on February 13 to check on the situation were not successful. A long-time Embassy contact, Pham has spoken to us several times of late about the recent rise in tensions in the Maldives -- see Reftels. Tensions began their spike in September 2003 when rioting erupted in Male' after police shootings at a prison on a nearby island.)

3. (C) DISSIDENT TO RETURN?: In another sign of political dissonance, Mission has been contacted by Waheed Hassan, a former member of the Majlis (Parliament) and key figure in Maldivian opposition circles. Currently working for UNICEF in Kabul, Afghanistan, Hassan -- via e-mail -- related that he was contemplating a return to the Maldives at the request of other opposition elements soon. It is not clear whether Hassan has received GoRM permission to return. Due to his anti-Gayoom views, however, it is believed that he has been in semi-official exile for some years and could potentially be a target for arrest.

4. (C) OPPOSITION PARTY ACTIVITIES: In the meantime, the most recent (February) newsletter of the anti-Gayoom Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) stated that former attorney general Mohamed Munavvar and former planning minister Ibrahim Hussain Zaki had joined the opposition party's ranks. (Note: The MDP is not a recognized legal entity in the Maldives, where Gayoom has nixed the creation of political parties. It is active among Maldivians living overseas, however, including those in Sri Lanka, and may be increasingly active inside the Maldives.) Both Munavvar and Zaki were ousted from their positions when Gayoom reshuffled his cabinet at the time of his November 2003 inauguration. Munavvar, however, still retains his seat in the Majlis, representing the southern atoll district of Addu. In the past, both men have spoken to Mission of their dissatisfaction with Gayoom and the current political climate in the Maldives (see Reftels). The MDP's claim that the two men have joined that party has not been independently confirmed, however.

5. (C) As for the MDP, the party seems to be becoming increasingly active. According to its website (www.maldiviandemocraticparty.org), the party just conducted online elections for a "General Council," which concluded February 12. Among those reportedly elected to the MDP's 15-member council were Zaki, as well as Jenifer Latheef, daughter of one of the MDP

organizers. It is not precisely clear, but Waheed Hassan appears to be one of the major organizers of the MDP.

16. (C) COMMENT: It remains unclear how serious the situation is for Gayoom. He has been in power for over 25 years now and, by and large, has proven adept at defusing opposition to his rule. That said, the situation does appear relatively tense, especially in light of the unprecedented rioting that rocked Male' last September after prison violence on a nearby island (see Reftels). The official reports that Gayoom ordered to look into the September violence are now out and in public view, but the opposition is making great hay out of the fact that some sections were redacted, claiming that there has been a cover-up (Gayoom says the redacted sections deal with issues that need to be protected for reasons of national security). Given the ferocity of the charges and the apparent web of support the MDP is netting, Gayoom clearly has his hands full. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD